

FACILITATING A GROUP

Roles and Responsibilities of a Skilled Facilitator

After many years of facilitating consensus based groups and contentious meetings, we offer that the following roles and responsibilities be considered by the skilled facilitator. Every group you work with will have different expectations and tolerances for process. We suggest you clarify with the group your role and their role prior to the start of any meeting. The following suggestions are a baseline for your work. Creativity and experience will help you add new ideas to this baseline level to enhance the work you do.

Responsibilities of a facilitator:

1. Help the group create an agenda, before or during the meeting.
 2. Structure the participation of the group (help everyone in the group feel included and able to participate).
 3. Facilitate the group's procedures and decision making process.
 4. Provide the group memory system.
 5. Facilitate the group's maintenance.
 6. Facilitate accountability.
 7. Debrief at the end of the meeting.
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1. Develop the Agenda: help the group create an agenda, before or during the meeting that includes:
 - ◆ Starting time
 - ◆ Ending time
 - ◆ Issues to be discussed, sequence of items and person responsible for presenting each item
 - ◆ Time allotted for each issue
 - ◆ Actions which need to be taken on each issue (e.g. discussion, input, decision, approval)
 - ◆ Meeting procedure and decision-making method
 - ◆ Time for debriefing at the end of meeting
 2. Structure the Participation: help everyone in the group participate and feel included:
 - ◆ Help the group find a norm of equal influence
 - ◆ Call on and encourage those who have not spoken
 - ◆ Reduce the speaking time of those who dominate
 - ◆ Where helpful, suggest that group members raise their hands and then speak one by one, in order of raising their hands

3. Facilitate the Group's Procedures and Decision Making Process

The group must discuss and decide:

- its procedures for group discussion and problem solving
- its decision making process

The facilitator must help the participants:

- ◆ Present issues, needs and ideas
- ◆ Clarify and present background information and opinion
- ◆ Ask for additional information and opinions that need to be considered
- ◆ Look at and discuss the implications of the information and opinions
- ◆ Look at and discuss creative options
- ◆ Develop realistic options from the list of potential options
- ◆ Define criteria for a good decision (if one is needed)
- ◆ Find common ground, or draw out a compromise, by reviewing the issues, needs, options and criteria that the group has discussed

The facilitator should assist the group's communication by:

- Summarizing opinions, differences and decisions
- Clarifying agreements the group may have reached, or directions the group may need to go in
- Moving the process of the meeting forward while not cutting off useful discussion too soon
- Restating opinions and options in a neutral manner to help the group move toward resolution

4. Providing the group memory system

In order for the group to have a common memory, it must be possible for each member to see what ideas the group has already considered. Most commonly, groups use a board or chart and felt tip markers. The requirements for a good memory system are that it:

- ◆ Be visible to all members of the group
- ◆ Be maintained simultaneously with the group's thought process
- ◆ Accurately reflect the language of the group members
- ◆ Be typed up and copied for members by the next meeting as the flipcharts appeared

5. Facilitating group maintenance

The facilitator must assist the group in:

- ◆ Gatekeeping: inviting people to speak, or moving on to the next person

- ◆ Harmonizing: calming the group, reducing tension and over-emotionalizing, acknowledging the feelings of the group or a participant
- ◆ Pointing out the way a group is working: to help the group overcome a process which is not working, the facilitator needs to tell the group what patterns he or she is seeing. This must be done delicately, usually with suggestions for a different process, or opening a discussion for suggestions for a different process.
- ◆ Encouraging the group: to help the group over frustrating times, the facilitator needs to serve as a cheer leader. This can be done by complimenting the group, putting expressed frustration into perspective, helping a group recall past processes which got stalled but were ultimately successful, or talking about the benefits of staying with the process.

6. Facilitate Accountability

The facilitator must help the group be their individual and collective “best”, both at and between meetings. One way to do this is to make certain participants remain accountable to the process and their commitments. There are a number of ways a facilitator can do this:

- Ask people “What can you add to the group?”
- Ask people to make commitments that are specific, including when they will be completed
- Follow-up with individuals after the meeting and near when they said they would have completed their task to see if additional assistance or time is needed. It is better to let the group know that a task will be delayed than to have nothing get done at all. So, facilitate that communication back to the group between sessions, if necessary.
- Remind the group that its success depends on the actions and follow through of each individual. They will help each other be accountable.

7. Debriefing Group Efforts

At the end of each group meeting, there should be a 5 to 10-minute debriefing. The purpose of the debriefing is to allow each group member to reflect on and state how they are feeling about the group, the process, or the result of the meeting. No judgments should be made about points raised, just capture the learning.

These materials are adapted from work of many of our colleagues, especially the material of Zena Zumeta.